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What Would Saint Vincent de Paul Do About Today's Global Poverty?

Personalism vs. Paternalism: Social Work's Role Within a Vincentian Institution of Higher Education in Creating University/Community Bridging Opportunities to Assist in the Eradication of Poverty

BY

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This paper will explore and compare concepts associated with DePaul University's mission and values statement and the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics in order to develop and sustain community/university partnerships that work towards poverty eradication. In the city of Chicago, many people are affected and made vulnerable by the circumstance of poverty. Living in poverty, however, means different things to different people. Social work can and must bring attention to and address the many levels of vulnerability that poor people are experiencing in the world.

Introduction

If someone is new to the city of Chicago, or has been segregated for much of their lives from the rich diversity of this multicultural city, they are likely to be warned of neighborhoods that "you just shouldn't go into." Terms such as "west side" or "south side" take on special meanings that are reinforced as one drives in certain directions and across Mason-Dixon-like lines in the city. Whereas the physical boundaries of race and class are sometimes less than clear, the displacement of former residents is made evident by new signs of privilege (e.g., Starbucks, new schools, and "green spaces") and other hallmarks of neighborhood change. Sadly, these boundaries have been internalized within ourselves too, segregating our compassion for those who have the least from our own desires to seek comfort and success.

DePaul University has lived within and around these boundaries since its inception as an institution designed in part to educate first-generation college students within the urban center of Chicago. DePaul makes its presence seen and felt in a number of ways, from the number of its graduates who currently live and work within the city (Chicago's current mayor, Richard M.

Daley, is a graduate of its law school, and Commonwealth Edison Chairman and CEO Frank Clark received his Bachelor of Arts degree there), to the number of its students who perform community service in Chicago neighborhoods (over 3,000 students during the 2006-2007 academic year alone).¹ In developing a social work program, DePaul has committed itself to engaging the community and reaching out to those most vulnerable in Chicago. DePaul's connection to urban life and to Vincentian values ties its mission to a preferential option for the poor. This article explores how DePaul's mission and values accord with the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics in our effort to develop and sustain community/university partnerships that work towards the eradication of poverty.

Introducing Saint Vincent

I work and teach within DePaul's Masters of Social Work program. It is a new program here at the university, and I was a part of its inception. I originally came to DePaul in 1998 not as a social work educator but as a social work practitioner, helping develop a component of its community mental health center, the Urban Systems of Care program (USC). The USC was a state-funded program designed to offer mental health services for children and families living in Chicago's public housing — primarily within the Cabrini-Green and Lathrop Homes housing developments — and to address the stigma associated with mental illness and mental health services within communities of color and among those in poverty. We sought to challenge the current mental health system by addressing the process by which children are labeled with potentially discriminating diagnoses early in life and then begin a slow process of becoming institutionalized within the larger mental health system.

My first task within the Cabrini-Green housing development was to meet with community elders, leaders, the resident management corporation (RMC), and the leadership advisory councils (LAC), as well as other existing social service and nonprofit agencies. This is an important show of respect, one that many who work in institutions of higher education overlook. The first question I was asked by the president of the LAC was, "Isn't DePaul attempting to build over our property?" Of course I had no answer. I assured them that this was news to me, but that I would find out what was going on. Apparently, there had been some talk at one point that DePaul was looking to build a soccer field or the like near the "white" buildings of Cabrini-Green.²

¹ For more information concerning DePaul University's Steans Center for Community-based Service Learning, see Howard Rosing, Ph.D., "Untangling the Ivy: Discovering Vincentian Service Learning at DePaul University," published in this same issue of *Vincentian Heritage*.

² The "white" buildings within the Cabrini-Green housing development, named for William Green and located north of Division Street, appeared white due to their concrete exteriors. The

Members of the DePaul administration confirmed that the rumor had been true but that the plan had been abandoned some years before. However, the communal and the institutional memory of the plan were still very present.



One of the last remaining “white” buildings of the Cabrini-Green housing development. Over the last decade most have been demolished to make way for development and gentrification.

Public Domain

Mindy Thompson Fullilove called the phenomenon of residential displacement and its resulting impact on the residents of many low-income communities “root shock.” In a book of the same name she describes the trauma associated with displacement, and the ways in which people’s emotional lives are often neglected when events like the tearing down of public housing occur.³ Although the soccer field at Cabrini-Green was never built, the memory, fear, and trauma associated with its construction remained. This is an example of how large institutions, regardless of their history, can develop a reputation. My work was to help build a relationship with the community, which meant that we had to work on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. It meant explaining mental health to people at schools, community meetings, youth celebrations, and the like, and it also meant attending tenant meetings that looked at addressing university policies associated with impending community displacement.

An organization I am familiar with that recently started working on Chicago’s south side began by setting up an “outreach” center without ever attempting to reach out to community leaders. This resulted in mistrust among community residents, and in the end the results of the program failed to match

exteriors of the Cabrini buildings, named for Frances Cabrini and located south of Division Street, were built of brick and red in color. Hence many residents, and even outsiders, often referred to the Cabrini buildings as the “reds” and the Green homes as the “whites.”

³ Mindy Thompson Fullilove, *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, And What We Can Do About It* (New York: One World, 2004).

the organization's admirable intentions. A mission to go out and do good, became, as Ivan Illich puts it, "a road to hell paved with good intentions."⁴

When students from the university enter a relationship with the community, the notions of power and privilege often interact. For community organizations — many of which are vulnerable to the problems of budget cuts by federal and local governments, lack of programming creativity due to funding restraints, and the need to develop and maintain relationships with various economic and social sources — the university is often seen as a potential resource and a willing ally to their plight. However, institutions of higher learning have often exploited community interests, using community participants as research subjects with little return, displacing them via land grabs into economically depressed areas, and offering service and volunteerism that impose values from outside of the community based on perceptions of the community-as-deficit.

This relationship, based on power and privilege, can be difficult to negotiate, and a community voice that declares its own needs in opposition to those of the university becomes more important to understand. Many academics approach the community with projects and ideas without asking first what its needs are. One professor, who happened to be white and had been monitoring literature in her discipline, offered that she wanted "to help poor people." In her course proposal she equated the black community in Chicago with poor people, using the two terms interchangeably in her rhetoric. For her, "poor" and "black" had become synonymous in spite of large African-American communities within Chicago that were predominantly middle-class, not to mention the presence of middle-class and economically wealthy African-Americans throughout the city and within her workplace. Well-meaning professors commit gaffes like this frequently.

It is important to be clear that being black or Latino does not equate with being poor, and that being poor does not mean you are a person of color. The dynamic that often occurs is one in which race defines the perception associated with class and terms like black, Latino, and poor become synonymous. We cannot be afraid to look at these two issues in this dynamic of poverty: that of class and that of race and ethnicity.

In my experience one of two things occurs when we discuss the issue of race as it relates to poverty. One is the claim that "it's about poverty, not about race" — a discourse which emphasizes the class issue and minimizes race. Our country's greatest sin, or greatest wounding, involved the issue of race. In Chicago and throughout the U.S. today, blacks and Latinos make up the largest

⁴ Ivan Illich, "To Hell With Good Intentions," *National Society for Internships and Experiential Education* (1968), p. 1, at <http://www.nsee.org/> (accessed 10 June 2007).

percentage of people on the margins. The other problem with this perspective is how other groups are labeled and defined as “privileged,” as in the idea of Asians being the “model minority” within our culture, or the denial of actual privileges that do exist among us. Education about cross-cultural relations and historical oppression becomes important. University personnel should seek the history of the communities they enter from multiple sources including academic sources, print media, and experienced community workers.

Abram and Cruse offer an approach that may be helpful in addressing how to integrate faculty and students within diverse communities in respectful, learning-centered ways. Borrowing the concept of “reverse mission” from theological and mission studies, they suggest moving away from the traditional mission model of teaching, preaching, and converting in communities different from one’s own. They instead offer that the “conversion” should occur within the individual and reflect an intellectual and moral commitment to human solidarity and equality and justice.⁵ This approach, a shift more philosophical than religious, can be an entry point for many faculty and students to enter the field.

University administrators depend upon faculty to challenge students concerning their privilege and dominant group ideology. Students often encounter little challenge to dominant ideology, and may not be challenged by community-based organizational representatives. To introduce DePaul into the communities of Chicago in many ways means to introduce Saint Vincent there. The danger is that Vincentian personalism could turn into Vincentian paternalism, wherein the compassion and integrity of Saint Vincent is replaced by notions of “saving” the noble savage without the humility and respect to listen to, learn from, and work with the community.⁶ In this regard, the university can become an “educational partner.” When I worked in DePaul’s Steans Center for Community-based Service Learning, charged with making connections between Chicago communities and our students, we felt that the idea of educational partnership was critical to our work. Here, Saint Vincent’s question and answer concerning human dignity becomes relevant: “Why help this disheveled old man?” — “Because you’ve seen through the other side of the coin.”⁷ Thomas McKenna, C.M., suggests here that we can benefit from an exchange with another as well as the other person can from us, that “other side of the coin.” Here there is no

⁵ F.Y. Abram, and A. Cruse, “A Reconceptualization of ‘Reverse Mission’ for International Social Work Education and Practice,” *Social Work Education* 26:1 (2007), 3-19.

⁶ “Vincentian personalism” as described in DePaul University’s mission statement is “ennobling the God-given dignity of each person.” For further explanation of this term, see DePaul University’s Mission Statement at www.mission.depaul.edu.

⁷ Thomas McKenna, C.M., “People of the Scarred Coin,” *Vincentian Heritage* 22:2 (2001), 208.

condescension or belittlement, but instead an understanding of the need to build relationships across culture, to learn with instead of learning apart, to learn from instead of learning about. In seeing from the other side, we find that our pasts and our present are inextricably linked together.

So my work as an administrator, educator, community organizer, and clinician is to be clear about my own privileges, education, and lens as a community member from a historically marginalized group. I have to be conscious of the letters associated with my name — MSW/LCSW, etc. — and of the fact that DePaul University and Saint Vincent are also “at my back.” I heard someone say once that it is my responsibility to let the community know that I have not left them — not theirs to figure it out. This can come via entering the relationship with humility, respect, and a genuine desire to “learn from” rather than just “learn about.” If DePaul seeks to “contribute to the societal, economic, cultural, and ethical quality of life in the [Chicagoland] metropolitan area and beyond,” then we must understand that what is in the best interest of DePaul may not always be in the best interest of the community.⁸ Yet what is in the best interest of the community will often be in the best interest of DePaul. It is normally our role to put students first, but when the discussion turns to mission this can change. Thinking of education as a service to the greater good is in the best interest of everyone, not just students who go on to graduate school or enjoy campus life the most. Manley, Buffa, Dube, and Reed, in describing the Black Metropolis project and model at DePaul, offer that community service must move from the “soup kitchen” model, to learning opportunities that integrate community institutions, community residents, university personnel, and students in mutually beneficial partnerships. This offers students a richer learning experience, and demonstrates how “collaborating with various community actors can foster, augment, and sustain a relationship of reciprocity between university and community agents.”⁹

Mission Aligned

We started the Master of Social Work program at DePaul thinking about these issues and communal responses to ending poverty, motivated by a commitment to social justice and to creating engaged faculty who could teach theory and also practice social work — leaders who would understand happenings on the ground and what was in the “air.” In today’s world, so many people affected by poverty go under the radar of society. People on the margins, voiceless at times, but never without resilience, make up a huge

⁸ Board of Trustees, DePaul University (1991). DePaul University Mission Statement, at <http://mission.depaul.edu/mission/index.asp> (accessed 31 March 2008).

⁹ T. Manley, A. Buffa, C. Dube, and L. Reed, “Putting the Learning in Service-Learning: From Soup Kitchen Models to the Black Metropolis Model,” *Education and Urban Society* 38:2 (2006), 116.

percentage of the world's population. Living in poverty means different things to different people; social work can and must address the many levels of discomfort people are experiencing. We wanted our program to offer students the chance to "get their hands dirty," ready to do anything necessary to aid others, as well as lead.

DePaul University was founded on the premise that all people have dignity and deserve respect and opportunity. Its mission has much in common with the aims of professional social work. Through working directly with people and within organizations, professional social work is dedicated to "... enhanc[ing] human well-being and help[ing] meet the basic human needs of all people."¹⁰ The profession's central tenets center on service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence.¹¹ It is a service profession and, as such, is dedicated to extending opportunities to all, advocating for the voiceless, and working towards improving society. Likewise, DePaul University's mission is "manifested by the members of the DePaul community in a sensitivity to and care for the needs of each other and of those served, with a special concern for the deprived members of society."¹²

The MSW Degree Program's purpose is further stated in its operational mission statement:

- The DePaul University MSW Degree Program trains ethical and competent leaders in the social work profession.
- The DePaul University MSW Degree Program models and prepares students to work collaboratively in partnership with individuals, organizations, and communities working towards mutually-defined goals.
- The DePaul University MSW Degree Program promotes social and economic justice through its emphasis on community practice, empowerment, social development, and collaboration.
- The DePaul University MSW Degree Program models an inclusive context for learning and an appreciation of human rights and diversity in all of its operations.

The mission of DePaul University's MSW Program is to support a pragmatic approach to eradicating poverty, emphasizing human rights and

¹⁰ National Association of Social Workers, "National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics" (1999), p. 1, at <http://socialworkers.org/> (accessed 5 June 2007).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Board of Trustees, DePaul University.

focusing on community and social development, teaching students to work with vulnerable populations to promote service and social justice. This mission fits well with Saint Vincent's pragmatic approach.

One student offers us an example of the type of person who embodies this program. Marcus, a Native American, came to our program from Utah after having seen our website and read about the mission of DePaul. An MSW student has to do two internships for a combined total of 1,120 hours in order to graduate. This process is viewed as the heart of social work: students engage directly within communities, and they merge classroom knowledge with practical experience. Marcus spent his first year at the American Indian Center, getting to know Chicago's Native American population and working with youth and seniors as a group counselor and case manager. Next year he will work with children and families at the Saint Vincent DePaul Center, and later take the benefit of his experience back to his reservation in Utah, where he will assist in the development of a similar community-based agency.

So what would Saint Vincent do about today's poverty? Much like him, we want our students to be agents of change — compassionate, yet pragmatic and schooled in the nuances of effecting change, including economic development and community collaboration.¹³ We want our students to understand how to use available resources to create partnerships that promote dignity and understanding. DePaul University's commitment to carrying out its mission ethically reflects this attitude and gives students solid opportunities to work in communities while reflecting upon the meaning of justice and service, as well as upon the life and work of Saint Vincent. It is our hope that other students like Marcus will continue to enter our program, heed the mission of Saint Vincent, the values of the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics, and the mission of the MSW Program in working to eradicate poverty.

¹³ Margaret Posig, "Saint Vincent de Paul as a Leader of Change: The Key Roles of a Higher Purpose and Empowerment," *Vincentian Heritage* 23-25:2 (2005), 27-41.